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ABSTRACT

Competency assessment is used for diagnostic purposes at the City University of New York (CUNY) Queens College. CUNY had decided that all students admitted after 1987 be tested. In addition, minimum competencies were required after the completion of 60 credits. Queens College chose to use the tests for entering freshmen for placement decisions, for evaluation of instructional effectiveness, and for satisfying the requirements of one of the basic mathematics courses. As a result of this decision, attention was focused on basic skills courses and workshops were instituted. Also, a system was developed to monitor student progress through the upper division competency test. The test battery includes a holistically scored writing sample, the Reading Comprehension Examination of the Descriptive Tests of Language Skills, the Mathematics Competency Examination, and the Queens College Math Placement Examination. Test scores are used to evaluate: (1) a student's competency in basic skills to assure appropriate course placement; and (2) the effectiveness of instruction (through their use as exit criteria in basic skills courses). The Testing Center was created to administer this program and to provide reports. As a result of this program, both student achievement and communication with the college's feeder schools have improved. (GDC)

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The Effects of The City University of New York Freshman Skills Assessment Program: One College's Experience

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We find ourselves at a point in time when critics, Boards of Regents, State Legislatures, parents, students and alumni are accusing Higher Education of lowering standards and are demanding greater accountability from us. Competency Assessment has been proposed as a way of insuring that accountability and demonstrating standards. As simplistic as this approach may be, there can be positive values associated with competency assessment because testing of students provides us with information. In and of itself, it is no different from any other information source. We subject it to the same standards which we apply to other sources of information i.e.: Is it true? Is it valid? Is it reliable? Is it relevant? If we can answer yes, or a qualified yes, to these questions, then we can use this information to improve the quality of our students' academic lives. At the same time we strive to improve the quality of the information we get. Viewed in this light, test information is much more benign than the critics of testing would have us believe. But the real question is not whether we will test or not; testing has been an integral part of education since its beginnings. The real question, as with any other information we gather, is what we will do with this information. Testing alone will not make colleges or universities better or worse; however, the programs we build, the curricula we develop and the other directions we take as a result of the information which tests provide are the things which will make us better or worse.

The most legitimate uses of competency assessment testing are diagnostic and evaluative. The diagnostic function of testing helps us to determine where students are at a particular point in time and directs us toward the needs that must be addressed in their academic programs. The evaluative function of testing allows us to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction which was prescribed as a result of the initial testing. In this regard these kinds of tests are analagous to the kinds of tests which are commonly a part of periodic physical check ups and which are used to determine the relative state of an individual's health. If these tests uncover an area of pathology, a physician will prescribe treatment and following treatment will run the tests again to determine if the treatment has been effective. If the underlying pathology is something curable like an infection and if the treatment has been successful, the tests are discontinued. However, if the pathology is treatable but not curable, like high blood pressure, testing will be continuous because the treatment is

continuous. Few of us find fault with this kind of testing in the realm of physical health, but often we have different feelings when tests with similar functions are used in educational settings. I believe that educational testing has been misused and misunderstood. If we use tests in education only to document the underlying pathology without doing anything to treat the condition, we deserve the criticism which has been leveled at us. The point is that testing itself should not be on trial; rather that we should be judged by the uses we make of test results.

Often when testing is mandated, those who demand we test tend to view testing as an end in itself. Whether it is our tendency to believe in instant panaceas or in magic, we would like to believe that by taking this step, we have done something to solve the problem. Unfortunately, it is often this belief which causes more problems than it solves, and in the process, gives testing a bad name.

In the case of the City University of New York, the Board of Trustees promulgated in 1976 a series of resolutions having to do with academic standards within the University. One resolution stated that students moving from lower division to upper division status must attain a specified standard in basic learning skills so as to be able to cope successfully with advanced work in the academic disciplines. This mandate was a result of the university's experience with its open admissions policy and the general experience of the 70's with grade inflation and the reduction of requirements within the constituent colleges. If the colleges had responded to this mandate only by testing students at the 61st credit, this mandate would have been a prime example of the magic bullet. However, those who were teaching basic skills at the colleges made great efforts to convince the administration that testing had to occur much earlier in students' careers, ideally at the beginning so that those students found to be deficient in various skill areas could be identified and provided with instruction to alleviate the deficiencies. It was finally agreed by the Chancellor and Board of Trustees that all newly admitted students entering the University in Fall 1978 should be tested prior to entry. However, the individual colleges were free to do with the test information whatever they wished. The college with which I am associated chose to use the competency tests sometimes alone, sometimes in conjunction with other tests, as the basis for making placement decisions. Queens College also chose to use the

tests to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction, and made passing the appropriate competency exam one of the conditions for passing a basic skills course. This decision has affected the institution in many ways.

First, it focussed attention on the basic skills courses. It caused those teaching the courses to think about course objectives, criteria for measuring them, curricular approaches to meeting those objectives and additional supports that might be needed. Extensive course revision in basic skills areas was a result of the testing mandate. The development of support workshops in Reading, Writing and Mathematics also occurred. We were forced to rethink our course placements so that students would be accurately matched with the right course. We also had to look at our students more carefully and try to determine their needs more accurately. This meant that we had to advise our students better. We could not let students with severe skill deficiencies in reading and writing take other academic courses which they would likely fail because their skills were inadequate. The decision to test meant that we had to differentiate the kinds of language problems our students had--that we had to recognize that non-English dominant students required different kinds of instruction from native English speakers. It meant that we needed to institute more levels of remedial instruction. It meant that we had to try to estimate the number of semesters of instruction a student would probably need in order to achieve proficiency. All of these activities occurred over time and all of these activities are continuous and on-going. We do not profess to have answers to all the questions which an integrated testing program raises, but we have developed procedures for finding the answers and testing the results.

The mandate for competency assessment also meant that we had to institute a system for monitoring students' progress in passing the competency exams and taking the required courses. We did not want students to have reached the point of completing 61 credits and to be surprised that they would not continue at the University because they had not passed the competency exams. The Testing Center developed the mechanisms for monitoring progress and a faculty committee was established to hear appeals for extensions of time to complete requirements. At this point few students are dismissed without at least one extension of time and an interview in which they are told exactly what they must do in order to be able to

continue. We find, at this point, that the students who have the most difficulty satisfying the competency requirements are those who transfer from another unit of CUNY where the testing program is not as well integrated as at Queens, or those who transfer from community colleges outside of CUNY which have no integrated competency assessment testing.

The Testing Program at Queens

All undergraduate students accepted for admission to the College are assigned a testing date. These dates are set at the beginning of the year in conjunction with the Admissions Office, the advising office, the Dean of Students, Registrar and other affected offices. Because students are allocated to the College in several different phases, there are multiple testing dates and times including days, evenings and Saturdays. All of the physical and logistical arrangements for testing are handled by the testing center. The test battery takes approximately 3½ hours to administer and consists of a writing sample, a reading test and a mathematics test.

Often the occasion of taking the CUNY assessment test is the first direct contact incoming students have with the College. Students appear at their pre-assigned dates and times and are assigned to classrooms where the tests are given. We have experimented with a number of configurations for the testing each of which has major disadvantages. We have tried testing using our large auditorium for testing one thousand students. However, students must use lap boards and cope with less than ideal test-taking conditions. The major advantage of this kind of testing is that it assures a highly standardized testing situation. The alternative is to use smaller lecture room facilities which will accommodate from 50-150 students. The conditions under which the tests are taken are almost ideal, but the multiplicity of test administrators reduces the uniformity of the testing procedures. We have, however, opted for the latter condition and attempted to deal with the issue of multiple test administrators by improving our training of proctors and test administrators. We typically use students who are upper classmen and graduate students. We draw them from among student leaders, tutors in our reading, writing and math workshops, and academic tutoring centers, and peer advisors. All student proctors must have passed all their competency exams, have completed all their basic skill requirements, be recommended by the faculty and have undergone some

training. We are thus insured of having students who are sensitive to the needs and concerns of incoming students and who can help to alleviate some of the anxiety which surrounds testing. The effect is more far-reaching in that we produce a cadre of students, often leaders at the College, who are knowledgeable about the tests and who hold positive attitudes about testing. Often these students are better advocates for testing than are the faculty or the administration.

After students are tested, test results and placements are either mailed to them or distributed prior to advisement if the turn-around time is too short to mail. All students must have a copy of scores and placements in hand before they may go for advisement. Students are required to take remedial and developmental courses in their first semester if they are so placed. Faculty advisors and peer advisors also utilize the results of the competency exams in helping students fill out their schedules: for instance by guiding students into or out of courses for which they have or lack the prerequisite basic skills. In the advisement sessions, tentative schedules are developed which may or may not be the actual schedules the student ends up with. Even when revision of schedules is necessary, students know which courses are mandated and which they can manipulate. Advisors present in the registration area help students to complete the registration process.

The instruments which are used for competency testing are mandated by the University. The writing test consists of an essay which is holistically scored on a 6 point scale modified from the ETS holistic scoring scheme. Each test is read blind by two readers; if the two readers agree, the essay score is the sum of the two readers' scores. If the two readers disagree, a third reader resolves the score and the essay score is the sum of the two readers who agree. Scores of 1-3 are failing and of 4-6 are passing. Discrepant essays are those in which one reader has placed the paper in the failing range and one reader has placed the paper in the passing range. Usually at the read-in, which is conducted by members of the English Department, a special table of expert readers is designated and does all the third readings. We also do one other screening of papers at our read-ins. We make empirical decisions about which papers are written by non-native speakers of English. These papers are read by specially trained readers drawn from the College English as a Second Language Department and from the ESL sections of the English Department. The purpose of this

reading is to be sure that non-native English speakers are correctly placed in either the CESL sequence which is remedial or the English ESL courses which parallel the regular college offerings.

The reading test is the Reading Comprehension Examination of the DTLS battery developed by ETS. It yields three sub-scores: understanding main ideas, understanding direct statements, and making inferences. Students passing this test are not required to take any courses in reading; those who fail the test are required to take either a college reading course or the appropriate CESL course in reading. Because of the nature of our college population, many students begin their basic skills instruction in the CESL department and then as they make progress move into college level courses in reading and writing.

The Mathematics Competency Examination which was developed in-house by a University Task Force on Mathematics consists of basic arithmetic and beginning algebra. This test is given in conjunction with the Queens College Math Placement Examination which consists of intermediate algebra and trigonometry. The College requirement in mathematics requires competence at the level of intermediate algebra. Thus a student may pass the University Competency Exam (Part I) and still have not satisfied this requirement which can be met in one of three ways:

1) The student has taken and passed the eleventh year regents examination in High School.
2) The student has placed at the level of pre-calculus or higher on the combined math competency and placement exam.
3) The student takes and passes Math 06 - a course in intermediate algebra.

Failing the competency exam may place a student in remedial courses in mathematics; passing the competency exam but failing the placement exam will place a student in Math 06, intermediate algebra. In addition, placement at the level of pre-calculus may be the prerequisite for other courses especially in the sciences, but also in the social sciences.

Thus, the results of the competency assessment tests give advisors much useful information for helping students choose appropriate level courses and for enhancing and maximizing their chances for success. And in all cases, the tests are utilized in two ways at the College: 1) to test the students competency in the basic skills areas and to place them in appropriate levels

of remedial, developmental and college-level courses and 2) to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction through their use as part of the exit criteria of basic skills courses. The philosophy underlying their use is to be sure that students are placed in the courses in which they should be successful given their skill levels. The purpose of the program as we are using it is not to put up barriers for students, but to place students in courses in which they can get what they need and have the optimum chance to be successful.

In order to administer this program, the Testing Center, which operates as an independent office within the Academic Skills and Resource Center and reports to the Associate Provost for Academic Services, was created. At its inception it consisted of the Director of Assessment Testing and Research, the Testing Coordinator, a full-time secretary, three part-time clerical assistants (20 hrs. per week each), 1 proctor (10 hrs per week) and 50-60 proctors who are hired on a periodic basis for large testings. All testing and re-testing of students is coordinated through the Testing Center. Recently the office has been reorganized following some policy changes at the College. The research and development function which had been the Director's responsibility has been moved to the Office of Institutional Research and the Director's and Coordinator's positions collapsed into one position. All other aspects have remained the same.

In attempting to determine the costs associated with testing many factors must be taken into account: the number of students to be tested, the professional expertise required of the Director, the typical rate of pay for part-time services, the costs associated with reading essays and scoring exams, the lease/purchase of scoring machines, the use of computer facilities, etc.

A rough break-down of costs at our college is as follows:

Personnel costs (full-time Director, Coordinator and Secretary)	70,000
Personnel costs (part-time) clerical assistants - $5-7 per hr.	23,000
proctors - $5-6 per hr.	11,000
essay readers - $5-6 per hr.	5,500
Supplies	500
	110,000

For those costs we tested approximately 6000 students annually and monitored the progress of approximately 15,000 students. The revised office with a Director who is not faculty, but at a higher level than the previous coordinator, will reduce the costs of full-time personnel by about half making the yearly costs about $75,000 for the Testing Center which now will operate without its research and development function. These costs will then be added to the Office of Institutional Research which will need to continue the research and placement validation studies. In most instances the start-up costs will be higher than the operating costs will be after the program has been running for a number of years.

These are the factors that must be taken into account as one attempts to estimate the costs of starting a new program. Also one must estimate the ability of existing computer hardware and peripherals to meet the needs of the testing program. I have not estimated the costs associated with programming, upgrading computer facilities and hardware, and leasing a scoring machine because these are costs which had to be incurred by our institution whether or not we had a testing program. I have also not estimated them because they were not charged off against the Testing Center operation and in all cases except specific programming needs of the Testing Center have other uses at the institution.

The Impact of Competency Assessment Testing

The testing mandate at Queens College has had a great deal of impact on the College. It created, among other things, a small cottage industry called testing. Because the Center has had the several function described earlier, it impacts greatly on students' lives.

Testing the students at the beginning of their college careers is only the first function of the Center. The Testing Center produces placements, mailers to students, and reports of various kinds which are utilized to monitor compliance with placements. (It is anticipated that this function will become automated and occur at registration when our new student information system is operational.) The Center organizes and coordinates the administration of retests in those courses for which the tests are part of the exit criteria, and monitors the progress of students, especially those who are approaching upper division status and have not passed the tests. It is the Testing Center which notifies students that they are approaching

their limits, organizes retests for them, monitors their progress in tutoring workshops and courses and places the registration holds which will prevent their continuing at the College. Appeals for extensions of time are heard by a specially created faculty committee which may grant one semester extensions with appropriate conditions for students deemed to be making progress. All students who are granted an extension are monitored by both the Testing Center and the faculty committee to be sure that they are continuing to make progress and fulfilling the conditions of their extension. Students who do not continue to make progress and/or do not fulfill the conditions of their extension are dropped from the College. They are eligible to return after they have enrolled at a CUNY community college as a non-degree student for specific remedial work and have passed the test(s) in which they were deficient. When we first began our intensive monitoring (about 1980-1981), we dropped about 50-75 students per semester. At this point, approximately 25-30 students are dropped from the College for this reason each semester.

Thus the testing program has produced greater compliance with mandated placements and provides greater accountability for the remedial/developmental courses which rely on the tests as part of their exit criteria. Furthermore, the monitoring of students who enter with skill deficiencies has assured that these students are making progress in remediating these deficiencies, and if they are not, removing them from the College. In most instances in which students are not permitted to re-register they are involved in an exit interview with the Testing Director or the Chair of The Faculty Appeals Committee in which options are spelled out for the student.

The major effect of this extensive monitoring is that students are improving in their basic skills. There has also been a change in the faculty's perceptions of student quality. The development of special courses and of extensive tutoring workshops in basic skills has provided the faculty with a place to send students for help when they are not doing well in academic course work. This coupled with the monitoring function has improved the quality of skill levels in continuing students.

In addition, the fact of competency assessment and placement testing has provided impetus for improving the identification of potential students for honors courses and special programs. At minimum all applicants for these programs must have passed their competency exams and some programs have

utilized higher cut-off scores. The exams provide these programs with additional criteria beyond high school grades for identifying those students who could be expected to benefit from these special programs and assure that the students chosen will have the skills necessary to succeed in the programs.

When the testing program began many faculty believed that we had created another bureaucratic snafu for students. As we have progressed the faculty have come to believe that the tests have credibility, that they have led to improvement in student performance and most important that they are relevant to a student's success in various academic disciplines.

Among the most interesting and promising effects of the testing program is that it has improved communication and articulation between the College and its feeder schools. Immediately after the testing program was put into place, area high school teachers began expressing concern about the number of students who were not passing their competency exams upon entry. Local area high school English teachers were the most upset that many of what they considered to be good students were not passing the Writing Test. Meetings between Composition faculty at the College and local high school English teachers were established in order to explore concerns. Out of this series of meetings a funding proposal was written and a grant from FIPSE was awarded to improve the teaching of writing at the High School level. college faculty, high school English teachers and college-level writing tutors were involved in a series of weekly seminars devoted to improving writing skills. Like many other such projects, all of us wrote, examined our own writing processes and generally increased our understanding of the writing process. Then together, high school and college faculty began working on an articulated curriculum of writing instruction which would span the high school and freshman college years. The Queens English project was funded for three years by FIPSE and continued for another three years through joint College and Board of Education funding. The latter three years continued to fund a College Coordinator and the college tutors who helped in high school classrooms and manned the Writing Workshops which had been established in the participating high schools. The impact of this project was to focus attention on the need to improve writing instruction in the high schools and to provide high school teachers with supports that would make writing programs possible. In this instance not just teachers

were involved; principals and Board of Education administrators became convinced that something could be done to improve writing. Since this project and more extensive writing instruction in the high schools, we have noticed some improvement in the passing rate on the entry writing test at the College.

The College has also increased communication with the feeder community colleges to help them to improve their testing and monitoring programs. Formal articulation agreements between the senior college and the community colleges are increasingly becoming contingent upon students' having passed their competency exams. Students who do not pass competency exams and are transferring from community colleges, will not get credit for their course work in the area of deficiency. In some instances students are denied matriculated status until skill deficiencies are remediated and competency assessment exams are passed. None of these mandates alone has produced miracles, but they have led to more cooperation and conversation and more mutual attempts to improve basic skills instruction.

In sum, our experience with Competency Assessment Testing has been essentially positive. We believe that we have improved our basic skill offerings, that we have refined our placement procedures, that we have increased the relevance and credibility of our basic skills courses, and generally that we have improved our resources at the College for dealing with students who are skill-deficient upon entry. Our success rate would tend to support these beliefs as would the perceptions of our faculty who consistently report improved skill levels among the students in their courses. The tests have not functioned as barriers to under-prepared students; they have assured that students are more accurately placed in appropriate entry level courses. As a result of the testing mandate we have improved our advisement procedures and our monitoring procedures. We have made it possible to identify more accurately students who qualify for honors programs and special programs. We have worked cooperatively with local area high schools and community colleges to improve basic skills instruction and accountability. None of this is meant to advocate Competency Assessment as a panacea for all the ills of Higher Education, but to suggest that a well thought out and integrated Competency Assessment program can have a positive impact upon the quality of an institution. Testing can be positive if the purpose of that testing is to place students at levels where they can maximize their opportunities to be successful.

All Competency Assessment Testing is ultimately reduced to the question of what one chooses to do with the test results. If one chooses to use the test results positively to improve placement and to improve course offerings so that deficiencies can be remediated, the effects will be positive. If tests are used only to document pathology and little or no effort is made to treat the problem, few positive effects will follow. Competency Assessment Testing is merely the beginning; the direction one chooses to pursue after testing will determine the effects on the institution.